

## When Second Chances Run Out...

Luke 16:19-31 (NIV)

<sup>19</sup> "There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day. <sup>20</sup> At his gate was laid a beggar named Lazarus, covered with sores <sup>21</sup> and longing to eat what fell from the rich man's table. Even the dogs came and licked his sores. <sup>22</sup> "The time came when the beggar died and the angels carried him to Abraham's side. The rich man also died and was buried. <sup>23</sup> In Hades, where he was in torment, he looked up and saw Abraham far away, with Lazarus by his side. <sup>24</sup> So he called to him, 'Father Abraham, have pity on me and send Lazarus to dip the tip of his finger in water and cool my tongue, because I am in agony in this fire.' <sup>25</sup> "But Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. <sup>26</sup> And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.' <sup>27</sup> "He answered, 'Then I beg you, father, send Lazarus to my family, <sup>28</sup> for I have five brothers. Let him warn them, so that they will not also come to this place of torment.' <sup>29</sup> "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' <sup>30</sup> " 'No, father Abraham,' he said, 'but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.' <sup>31</sup> "He said to him, 'If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead.' "

We love to root on our likable protagonists through impossible odds. In fact, with so many superhero movies, we've become conditioned to expect that our hero will always triumph no matter what. Maybe the epitome of this was with the last two Avengers movies. If you haven't seen *Avengers: Infinity War* or *Avengers: Endgame*, spoilers, but, even if you haven't, you would've seen this coming. At the end of *Avengers: Infinity War*, the bad guy, Thanos, succeeds in his plan to wipe out half of all life. The bad guy won. The good guys, our heroes, lost. Even if Marvel hadn't already told us we were getting another Avengers movie right away the next year, all of us knew that somehow, some way, the superheroes would still win the day. And they did in *Avengers: Endgame*.

But what if Marvel had actually ended the Avengers series with the loss to Thanos? What if all the superheroes that died in *Infinity War* stayed dead? What if our heroes really didn't have a second chance? We'd be outraged, maybe even a bit depressed. We all want a second chance and even believe in second chances. One of the reasons that we believe in second chances is because our God is a God of second chances. In a series of parables in the previous chapter of Luke, Jesus taught that the Lord created second chances for the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son, and even the older, spiritually lost son. The parable of the shrewd manager gave us and Jesus' listeners a second chance to evaluate how we are using our worldly wealth to gain eternal dwellings for others.

The reaction by Jesus' original hearers? "The Pharisees, who loved money, heard all this and were sneering at Jesus." (Luke 16:14) These hyper-devout Jews were completely missing the point of what Jesus was teaching. Worldly wealth was the goal for the Pharisees. It was a sign that God loved them, that they were doing right by God. This was their focus. So Jesus tells them another story.

"There was a rich man who was dressed in purple and fine linen and lived in luxury every day." (verse 19) He lived it up, enjoyed his wealth. He had obviously made it, unlike this other guy, this poor beggar covered in sores whose name was Lazarus. Lazarus had obviously been cursed by God with his failing health and his failed income. He longed for the table scraps from the rich man, but even that seemed to elude him. Nothing good was coming to Lazarus, except maybe the company of the dogs who licked his sores.

Then the inevitable came. They both died. Lazarus was carried up into heaven while the rich man was dragged down into Hades, a place of torment and fire. It was Hell. The suffering that the rich man endured was so bad that the very idea of Lazarus dipping his finger in water and then placing that finger on his tongue would be a sweet relief. His cry went up, "Have pity on me!" (verse 24)

The answer? In a word, "No." "Abraham replied, 'Son, remember that in your lifetime you received your good things, while Lazarus received bad things, but now he is comforted here and you are in agony. And besides all this, between us and you a great chasm has been set in place, so that those who want to go from here to you cannot, nor can anyone cross over from there to us.'" (verses 25-26) You had your chances. Your judgment is certain and unchangeable. There is no more relief for you. You chose your wealth over God, your life instead of his lived for you. Rich man, there is not another second chance for you.

No way. Unacceptable. What?! God is too loving to ever do that to one of us, to his children. Therefore, eternal, detrimental consequences can't be a thing. God will always give us a second chance.

God is loving. He is so loving that he gave us a chance when we had none. While we were lost in our sins, he intervened, came down from heaven, took on human flesh, lived the commandments perfectly for us, and then sacrificed his life in place of ours. He did everything to pay our bill of sin, to rescue us from this eternal prison of hell. God gave us a second chance to be saved, to be clothed in his perfection and so be perfect ourselves. God didn't do this because we deserved to be saved or because we deserved a second chance. He worked the impossible when we should have been condemned forever in that prison of fire and torment.

If we say that God will not send anyone to hell, then we are refusing to listen to what God actually says – just like the Pharisees were. This is why Jesus is telling this story. Hell does exist. It is a place, a prison, that God made for those who sinned. It was made for the devil and his angels who chose wickedness instead of perfection. They were locked up and cast away into eternal darkness. That is where the rich man went when he was judged upon his death. There was no holding place. There was no purgatory or spirit prison. A great chasm was fixed between him and Lazarus and Abraham and all believers, between heaven and hell. No one could cross over. The judgment stood and would not and could not be changed. There were no more second chances.

But that's not fair! How can God be so cruel, so heartless! Give him a second chance. But the rich man had a life of second chances from God. We learned that when the rich man asked Abraham to send Lazarus to warn the rich man's five brothers about this horrible, eternal place of torment. The answer? "Abraham replied, 'They have Moses and the Prophets; let them listen to them.' " "No, father Abraham, but if someone from the dead goes to them, they will repent.'" (verses 29-30) That's not good enough. God's Word is not good enough. People don't listen to it. I didn't listen to it. But, if you raise someone from the dead, then they will listen. That will convince them. This is the kind of second chance God should give.

Would that do the trick? History already answered this for us. There was a real man named Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha. He died. After four days of being dead, Jesus raised Lazarus back to life. What did the Pharisees do? They made a plot to kill Jesus, not worship him, not believe in him. They sneered even when a dead person came back to life. "If they do not listen to Moses and the Prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead." (verse 31)

You and I, we want second chances. We've become accustomed to them. Honestly, we need them. We have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. We have all at some point in our lives, disregarded God's Word and didn't listen to it. We've left that Bible on the bookshelf, collecting dust. We've thought that the Word of God was not good enough, that we needed more to convince people, like a feeling inside of us or some miraculous sign or some fool-proof philosophical thought. We put our own ideas of how God should do things instead of letting God tell us how he does things. How many second chances have we wasted?

The amazing thing is that God still gives us second chances over and over again. Every day that you have breath in your body and you are six feet above ground is another second chance. And God has not hidden these second chances from us. You want a second chance for heaven? It's Jesus. He's not standing before you, but his Word is. It's so readily accessible. There are 100,000,000 copies of the Bible sold every year. It's literally in arm's reach of you right now. It's accessible on your smartphone. You almost certainly have one if not multiple copies at home. Every day is another chance from God to hear his Word of eternal life, to hear how good triumphed over evil, how an impossible situation of restoring a broken, imperfect creation to perfection was done – not by our works, but by his. Every day is a chance to read his story of an unconditional, never failing love, how he chases after you and me, how even if we cheat on him, lie to him, yell at him, he still comes to say, "I forgive you, and I want you back." Every day we live on this earth is a second chance from God.

However, the story of the rich man and Lazarus makes the point that one day these second chances end. They do not go on forever. And we don't know when that day will be. So, the time to listen to how God saved the world, how he saved us, how he has gifted that eternal dwelling of heaven to us like he did for Lazarus, that place of comfort and all good things that lasts forever, that time is now. Jesus is giving us a second chance right now. Are we taking it or are we wasting it? Are the people we know and love taking it or wasting it? Can we be the one to give them that second chance? Will today be the day they listen to God and be saved by him?

God, thank you for the second chance you have given us today. For each new day that you give us, may we make use of it to get to know your hero story, how you saved us so that we know that we have a happily ever after, like Lazarus did. If we do not trust your Word to bring about this change in our lives or in other's people's lives, help us overcome our unbelief and instead to trust that the story you have given us is a second chance for every single person in the world. And Lord, even though I am afraid to tell others because people sneer at your Word and often refuse your second chances, use us to be the means to share your second chances every day at every opportunity until the day you gather us to your side and comfort us in heaven. Amen.